

The big deal about nano-derailers

The eccentricities that may be holding you and your career back

He's honest to the point of irritation. He barges into his neighbor's apartment without knocking, sliding in across the hardwood floor. Cosmo Kramer from "Seinfeld" is one of the quirkiest — and funniest — characters in American television history. Yet it might surprise you that he also has something important to teach us about workplace behavior.



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If you consider behaviors that stymie leaders, you probably think of big nos like being reluctant to deal with poor performers or micromanaging others. Yet smaller, more mundane workplace behaviors, not unlike Kramer's eccentricities, can prove detrimental, too, if left unchecked.

These behaviors may seem minor or innocuous, yet they derail relationships and over time limit careers.

Stumbling blocks

Nano-derailers, as I call them, are routine practices that leaders often don't realize they're performing. Common nano-derailers include requiring too much data before making decisions, going off on tangents and taking too long to get to a point, frequently running behind schedule and having to constantly cancel and reschedule meetings.

Respondents in my firm's recent study of chief human resource officers and heads of global talent highlighted these and other behaviors, confirming that they typically prevented the leaders who performed them from advancing in their careers.

Perfecting your game

Are you plagued by nano-derailers? It can be hard to tell. Many times when nano-derailers crop up, leaders have only a vague sense something is holding them back. Since they can't pinpoint the problem, they often fail to address it.

Leaders also become blind to nano-derailers as they achieve greater levels of

success. What they've done has worked so far, so there's no compelling reason to examine and refine their behavior.

Yet there is a reason to take action: Nano-derailers often prevent extremely successful executives from being as effective as they otherwise could be. Remember, when you get to the highest level, very small behaviors make all the difference.

As Greg Bishop reported in the December 2014 issue of *Sports Illustrated*, star NFL quarterback Tom Brady focuses on improving less than 2 percent of his game — micro behaviors like "shift[ing] his feet more quickly to create more torque." If you're a senior leader and you're not working on your nano-derailers, you're not playing at your best.

Reach out for feedback

To identify and address nano-derailers, ask your colleagues for feedback. Not all will respond honestly, but if you approach enough people and explicitly inquire about everything (big and small) that might help you reach your highest potential, they'll tell you about those pesky little behaviors that turn them off.

You might also want to look back on feedback you received about derailers that you dismissed as unimportant — as "style over substance."

Elite athletes address nano-derailers by working with trusted mentors, advisers and coaches. You can, too.

Kramer didn't work with a coach to shift his annoying habits, and if he had, he likely wouldn't have been as fun to watch. But you're not there entertaining audiences; you're helping lead organizations. And in that context, nano-derailers, small as they are, are a much bigger deal than they might seem. ●